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Director: James Solheim
jsolheim@episcopalchurch.org

Deputy Director: The Rev. Jan
Nunley
jnunley@episcopalchurch.org

Online Editor: Daphne Mack
dmack@episcopalchurch.org

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Calling of rector splits Maryland parish

by Jan Nunley

A controversial choice for rector of a small Maryland parish is at the center of a dispute over ecclesiastical authority in the Diocese of Washington.

On March 8, bishop *pro tempore* Jane Holmes Dixon told the vestry of Christ Episcopal Church and St. John's Parish in Accokeek, Maryland, that she could not approve its calling of the Rev. Samuel Lee Edwards as its next rector. But Edwards has moved his family into the rectory anyway, and started his duties April 1.

Edwards, former executive director of the organization Forward in Faith/North America (FIF/NA), is opposed to the ordination of women to the priesthood and episcopate. He stepped down from the FIF/NA position late last year.

In an interview, Dixon said the decision to withhold her approval came after a number of Christ Church parishioners contacted her expressing "substantial concerns" about published statements by Edwards regarding the Episcopal Church. "People were emailing and calling me, saying 'are you aware of this man's views?'" Dixon said in an interview. "I got on the Web and read these articles, indicating he wanted to take parishes out of the Episcopal Church. I needed to know whether he still believed that--whether he'd changed his mind. He hadn't. And so I had to say no," Dixon said.

"I cannot imagine a bishop, as chief pastor of a diocese, approving the election of a priest to serve a congregation when that priest has a marked and

publicly stated antipathy--far beyond comment and critique--toward the church in which he was ordained," said Presiding Bishop Frank Griswold in a statement March 16. "Therefore, as Presiding Bishop, I am in complete support of Bishop Dixon's decision, arrived at after consultation with Father Edwards, not to approve his election as rector."

Authority stems from canons

According to Title III.17.3 of the canons of the Episcopal Church, the ecclesiastical authority of the diocese must be satisfied that a person chosen as rector is a "duly qualified priest"--not only ordained in the Episcopal Church, but fit to be rector of the calling parish. Since Ronald Haines retired as diocesan bishop at the end of December, Dixon, the bishop suffragan, has been serving as bishop *pro tempore* and is the ecclesiastical authority in the diocese.

"Courts of law have recognized this well-established ecclesiastical rule in the Episcopal Church," said a statement issued by the diocese on March 16. "As the Supreme Court of the State of New York observed in a judgment later affirmed on appeal: 'The words "duly qualified" mean more than "duly ordained." They imply qualifications to preside over the worship and spiritual jurisdiction of the parish...'"

Dixon consulted with the Standing Committee and the Executive Committee of the Diocesan Council, and reported that both groups supported her decision.

Among the factors cited in the March statement were:

Reports of Edwards' prior teachings concerning the Episcopal Church, published in the FIF/NA magazine *FOUNDATIONS*, including a 1997 editorial calling ECUSA "the Unchurch," a 1998 editorial saying that ECUSA practices "institutionalized lawlessness," a 2000 editorial saying that the "machinery" of the Episcopal Church is "hell-bound" and advocating "gumming up the works," and another 2000 editorial urging clergy and congregations to "sever their connections" with ECUSA;

His "willingness to break certain solemn vows that he took at his ordination" as an Episcopal priest;

His "unwillingness to guarantee his obedience" to Dixon as his bishop; and

His "lack of commitment to keeping Christ Church and church property" in the Episcopal Church.

"My major concern is for the spiritual well-being of the members of the parish," Dixon explained. "We need them to be preaching and living the Gospel for the community that surrounds them."

Objections raised

In March, Charles H. Nalls, executive director of the conservative Canon Law Institute in Washington, offered to serve as counsel to the vestry *pro bono*. It is unclear who in the parish decided to retain Nalls, an attorney for the Washington law firm of [deKieffer & Horgan](#).

Six days after Dixon announced her decision, Nalls distributed a five-page rebuttal of her letter on the Internet. The letter claimed that Dixon's "right of advice and objection" to Edwards' call was limited to the 30 days following notification of the call. "There is no provision for extension of this period," which expired on January 22, Nalls said.

In the letter, Nalls maintained that Dixon did not respond to Christ Church's vestry until February 20, "more than sixty days after the notification, thirty days after notification of the intent to contract and two weeks after the ratification of the clergy contract," according to his letter.

[Canon III.17.2](#) specifies that no election for a rector may be held until the name of the priest being proposed is given to the ecclesiastical authority, who then has thirty days to respond. But the following section (III.17.3) states that "if the Ecclesiastical Authority be satisfied that the person so chosen is a duly qualified Priest and that the Priest has accepted the office," the election may be recorded as valid. There is no restriction in the canon on the amount of time given to the ecclesiastical authority to respond once an election is held.

According to the same section, sex cannot be a factor in determining a priest's qualifications, but the canon does not specify any other issues.

The investigation in this case is directed to the following points:

The first of these is the question of the origin of the disease.

The second is the question of the mode of transmission.

1. The origin of the disease.

The first of these is the question of the origin of the disease. It is well known that the disease is caused by a virus, and that the virus is transmitted from one person to another by direct contact.

The second is the question of the mode of transmission. It is well known that the disease is transmitted from one person to another by direct contact.

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Nalls said that Edwards "prepared and approved" the portion of his letter denying Dixon's assertions about Edwards. "Though the recognition of who is or is not a Bishop of the Anglican Communion is a matter that is not within his competence," the letter said, Edwards could recognize Dixon's "institutional status within the Communion [but] could not recognize [her] as a bishop in the succession of the apostles." He denied that Edwards intended to snub Dixon if installed as rector.

Locked out

But when Dixon attempted to visit the congregation for a parish meeting on the afternoon of March 18, she and the 97 people gathered found the parish doors locked--and the locks changed to prevent entry. The meeting reportedly had been canceled by the senior warden, Barbara Sturman, at an earlier service.

"About 80 of those people were from that parish," said Dixon, "and they said to me, 'Bishop, how are you going to help us? We are members of the Episcopal Church, we love it and we want to stay in it.'"

Forty of those present signed a petition calling for a parish meeting with the bishop on April 1. About 200 people showed up to hear Dixon's side of the controversy.

Until the situation is resolved, retired bishops Ted Eastman of Maryland and James Montgomery of Chicago have agreed to worship with the parish "so they're not without a pastor when I can't be there," Dixon said.

Working for mutual respect

Sources in the diocese say the initial response from some quarters to Dixon's election as suffragan resembled the reaction to the election of John Walker as bishop suffragan of Washington in 1971. Some congregations in the diocese reportedly called Walker by racist epithets and told him to "go home and minister to your own people." "But you are my people," Walker would reply, and by 1976 he was elected diocesan bishop, the second African-American to serve in that position in the

Episcopal Church.

According to a source, Haines' decision to support Dixon's visitations in parishes opposed to women's ordination was based on Walker's experience. In the five years since her consecration, Dixon has visited three of those parishes twice: Ascension and St. Agnes; St. Luke's, Bladensburg; and St. Paul's, K Street.

"Both the clergy and I in those traditional parishes have worked hard at mutual respect and mutual ministry," Dixon said. "There's no bar in this diocese to calling a rector who's opposed to women's ordination, or to visits in those parishes from bishops who are opposed to it."

"But respecting the ecclesiastical authority is a different thing, and that's what is at issue here."

--The Rev. Jan Nunley is deputy director of the Office of News and Information for the Episcopal Church.

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